

## Connecting to the Courts *Wisconsin Court System*

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### Volunteers in the Courts News

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#### **Dodge County begins victim-offender conferences**

For those who troll for symbols, locked doors are a treasure: the darkness, the separation, and suspicion. So it seemed fitting that the very first case to come to Dodge County 's new restorative justice program – a project that emphasizes communication and reconciliation through victim-offender conferences – focused on locked doors.

The offenders, two teenagers aged 13 and 15, met with the victim and the facilitator at the scene of the crime: a northern Dodge County church that they burglarized. In the conference, the offenders learned from the pastor that the teens had stolen something irreplaceable: the sense of security that once was felt within the church walls. Since the burglary, the pastor told the teens, the doors to the church are always locked. This is the only way to safeguard the people who work there, including a number of elderly women who are afraid.

"This one young man had no idea how far-reaching his actions were," said Nancy Franke, director of Restorative Justice for Dodge County. Franke said the meeting was an emotional one, and it ended with the teens agreeing to the pastor's request that they meet with the ministers in their own churches and ask to be assigned community service work. Franke's job, in addition to organizing the program and fundraising, is to make sure those promises are kept.

Three months ago, there was no opportunity for victim to meet offender, ask questions, explain the crime's impact, and be directly involved in designing a restitution plan. That has changed, thanks to the leadership of Judges Andrew P. Bissonnette, Daniel W. Klossner, and John R. Storck, all of whom helped to lead the effort. "Once I heard about restorative justice and what impact it was having in other Wisconsin communities, I knew that we needed to bring it to Dodge County to benefit our citizens as well," Bissonnette said. "Restorative justice programs leave victims feeling safer and more satisfied, while reducing recidivism for young offenders. "

After securing a grant from the Office of Justice Assistance ( see The Third Branch, *winter 2003*), the county established a board of directors for the program (the board includes representatives of law enforcement, clergy, social workers, and county government) and the board hired Franke, a longtime volunteer coordinator for Dodge County Human Services, to work 32 hours per week as program director. In May, after having recruited volunteers, Franke brought in a team from Barron County Restorative Justice to conduct six hours of training.

"We now have 18 volunteers who are just out-of-this-world," Franke said. The facilitators include teachers (both active and retired), social workers, homemakers, nurses, a father-daughter team, and a husband and wife. For now, they are handling only selected cases involving non-violent juvenile offenders. If the victim turns down the offer of a facilitated meeting, s/he still has the option of receiving a letter of apology from the offender.

The next step is to develop victim impact panels, which are designed to give offenders an up-close look at the devastation that can result from drunk driving. Victims spend about an hour relating their stories as offenders listen. According to an Outagamie County study, 14.7 percent of offenders who attended a victim impact panel committed another drunk driving offense; the recidivism rate among those who did not attend was 36.4 percent. "We just need to decide the types of cases we're going to pick, and identify victims who are willing to participate," Franke said. Recruitment and fundraising for all restorative justice initiatives are at the top of Franke's list, and she has booked meetings with local civic groups, religious leaders, and professional organizations into 2004. "This weekend, the 4-H is putting on a car wash and donating the proceeds for restorative justice," she said. "As word gets out, everybody wants to get involved."

### **CASA, WTCA set annual conferences**

The Wisconsin CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) Association and Wisconsin Teen Court Association (WTCA) will both hold their second annual conferences this September.

#### **CASA**

The Wisconsin CASA Association has announced their second annual conference open to CASA volunteers, professionals in social services and mental health, judges, guardian *ad litem* attorneys, foster parents, and educators. The conference will be at the Kalahari Resort in Wisconsin Dells on September 20, 2003. The keynote speaker will be Atty. Adam Cornell; Chief Justice Shirley S. Abrahamson will also speak.

The Wisconsin CASA Association supports the development, growth and continuation of local CASA programs that recruit and train volunteers to serve as Court Appointed Special Advocates for children who are subjects of judicial proceedings involving allegations that they have been abused, neglected, and are in need of protection or services. The Association also serves as a resource to educate, promote and strengthen CASA services in Wisconsin.

There are currently eight CASA programs in Wisconsin for the following counties: Bayfield County, Brown County, Columbia-Sauk Counties, Dane County, Fond du Lac County, Kenosha County, La Crosse County, and Milwaukee County. Volunteers for each program range from 16 to 43, serving up to 100 children in some programs.

For more information contact the Wisconsin CASA Association at (608) 742-5344 or e-mail [wicasa@wisconsincasa.org](mailto:wicasa@wisconsincasa.org).

#### **Teen court**

The Wisconsin Teen Court Association (WTCA) is proud to announce the second statewide conference for teen court coordinators, volunteers, and those interested in developing or learning more about the teen court process. The conference is scheduled for Thursday, September 25 at the Plaza Hotel and Suites in Wausau. Brochures will be available by the end of July.

Justice Ann Walsh Bradley will be the keynote speaker. The conference will feature awards, and specialized breakout sessions. The breakout sessions will be offered for coordinators, youth volunteers, and sessions of interest to both. Topics will include community service learning, interviewing and creative sentencing options, parenting programs for parents of defendants, and others.

The first statewide conference, held in November 2001, had over 200 participants from a variety of backgrounds, including many youth volunteers. Teen court is a restorative justice response to effectively deal with first time juvenile offenders. In Wisconsin, the statewide recidivism rate for teens who complete teen court programs is 10-20 percent, as much as five times lower than the rate for the traditional juvenile justice system. Teen court is cost effective as well, with most teen court programs costing less than incarceration or foster care for one juvenile offender for one year.

For more information contact WTCA President Nancy Anne Livingston of Vilas County Teen Court at 715-479-3749 or e-mail [nancy.livingston@ces.uwex.edu](mailto:nancy.livingston@ces.uwex.edu); or WTCA Vice President Shirley Zahn of Winnebago County Teen Court at 920-236-1120 or e-mail [szahn@co.winnebago.wi.us](mailto:szahn@co.winnebago.wi.us).

### **Sheboygan Teen Court cuts services**

The Sheboygan Teen Court, one of the longest-running teen courts in Wisconsin (the oldest, in Winnebago County, was launched by Judge Bruce Schmidt in 1996), cut its hours almost in half as of June 1 because of budget problems.

In its six-year life, the Sheboygan Teen Court has been funded with a patchwork of grants from the Office of Justice Assistance, Sheboygan County, United Way, the Sheboygan School District, and civic organizations such as Rotary. But several of these grants have run out, and no permanent funding source has been found.

Sheboygan Teen Court Coordinator Jeanne Jentsch, an employee of Lutheran Social Services and the longest-serving teen court leader in the state, said she was forced to cut back from 20 hours per week to 13. While she was not certain what impact the reduced hours would have on the court's ability to handle cases, Jentsch said it is likely that it will not be able to convene every month as it has at a minimum since 1997.

In 2002, the court handled 53 cases involving offenders between the ages of 12 and 16 who admitted to retail theft, disorderly conduct, smoking, criminal damage to property, trespassing, curfew violations, vandalism, and fireworks offenses. The most recent recidivism numbers show that 88 percent of kids going through the teen court stay out of trouble in the year that follows.

Key to keeping the recidivism figure low is Jentsch's active monitoring of each teen's progress. The offender has six months from the date of the sentence in which to complete all requirements or be referred to the district attorney's office for prosecution.

Like most of Wisconsin's 30 teen courts, the Sheboygan court requires that the offenders sit on future teen court juries as part of the sentence. The court also provides important experience for students from the Lakeshore Technical College criminal justice program, who serve as judges.

Jentsch hopes to continue taking interns from the technical college and plans to strengthen her effort to communicate the importance of the teen court to the schools and the community. She is also expanding her work to Manitowoc, where she is taking over for retired Sheriff Tom Kocourek, who helped to start the Manitowoc Teen Court. That court, established two years ago and based on the Sheboygan model, has found funding through 2004 from three foundations.

New municipal court hopes to make use of teen court

In spite of the Sheboygan County Teen Court's shortened hours, a new municipal court in Plymouth is considering sending cases there.

Atty. Elizabeth Gamsky Rich, State Bar of Wisconsin pro bono coordinator, has volunteered to promote the teen court and seek additional funding from businesses around the community. According to the latest figures, the teen court in Sheboygan can function on \$25,000 per year. For one juvenile to stay in detention for seven months it would cost the county \$175 per day or approximately \$36,700. "With that in mind, one successful case would pay for itself," said Rich.

Hoping to increase the usage of teen court, Rich is currently working with Jeanne Jentsch, Sheboygan teen court coordinator, to improve the court's visibility.

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*For more information contact Rich at (920) 892-2449.*

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